

THE  
HARLAN HOTEL  
IN  
IOWA HISTORY



The Harlan Hotel, built in 1857, was for sixteen years the home of James Harlan, a colorful personality in early Iowa. He lived here during his entire career in the national government.

James Harlan (1820-1899) came to Mount Pleasant in 1853 as President of the Mount Pleasant Collegiate Institute. During his term, he gained substantial support for the college from the Methodist Church, obtained a new state charter as Iowa Wesleyan University, and completed the Old Main building.

In 1855, James Harlan became Republican Senator from Iowa to the United States Congress, holding office during the crucial years of the Civil War. A close personal friend of President Abraham Lincoln, he was one of the persons admitted to the room of the dying president after the assassination at Ford's Theatre. Lincoln's plan to appoint him to a Cabinet Post was carried out by President Andrew Johnson. Harlan served as Secretary of the Interior from May 15, 1865 until July 27, 1866. In these positions, he worked for the extension of transcontinental railways. Upon resignation from the Cabinet, he re-assumed the Senatorship until 1873.

The close ties with Abraham Lincoln were reflected in the marriage, September 24, 1869, of his daughter Mary to Robert Todd Lincoln, the eldest son of the late president. This marriage brought the Lincoln family into a long association with Mount Pleasant.

In 1873, James Harlan returned permanently to Mount Pleasant, devoting his life to state affairs. Iowa newspapers refer to his frequent appearances as a public speaker. He was one of the two Iowans elected to the Hall of Fame at the National Capitol. A bronze statue, placed in position during February 1910, was the work of Iowa-born Nellie Verne Walker, who executed the statue of Chief Keokuk in Rand Park, Keokuk.

While President of Iowa Wesleyan University, Harlan purchased from W. P. Brazelton on November 22, 1854, the land on which the hotel now stands. During the Congressional recess of 1857, he built the brick structure with the mansard roof which forms the central section of the hotel.

Records show that on April 13, 1863; October 31, 1864; and November 15, 1864, Harlan made additional purchases of land surrounding his brick residence.

Gas fixtures were installed in October 1873 and additions, at a cost of \$2500, were made in February 1875.

Upon retirement from the Senate in 1873, James Harlan moved from this brick home in the center of Mount Pleasant to a frame house at the end of Main Street, adjacent to the campus of Iowa Wesleyan University. He remained there until his death in 1899, after which the house served as a part time residence for the Robert Todd Lincolns.

The downtown brick house and property had been conveyed to Harlan's wife on October 19, 1875 and were eventually inherited by Mrs. Robert Todd Lincoln. They passed out of the family on April 8, 1901 by sale to George E. Smith.

The Lincoln-Harlan room, a small dining room in the 1857 portion of the building, has been reconstructed in period. It contains the original fireplace and other interesting mementos of the era.

- *Louis A. Haselmayer*